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Museum communication between enlightenment and experience

An introduction

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I

In museum studies, the relation between enlightenment and experience has often been seen as an antagonistic discourse. In a pell-mell, debates over museums as temples of knowledge and public memory institutions versus Disneyfication, commercialization and adaptation to the experience economy might indicate this dichotomous relation. Especially, under the influence of the hype emanating from the latter concept, museum practices have been conceived of as a tension between a historical commitment to the values of “enlightenment” and more contemporary demands for producing entertaining “experiences” (Skot-Hansen 2008). This special theme of *Nordic Museology* has had its outset in discussions connected with the large Danish research and development project, *Our museum* (2016–2020). In this project, a central objective is to examine the antagonistic discourse in question here: how well-documented is this antithetical relationship between enlightenment and experience when discourses are critically examined? Or, rather, how many discourses contradict and even falsify this antagonism? (For a general introduction to *Our museum*, see Drotner 2017).

In line with the propositions of *Our*

museum this special theme views elements of enlightenment and experience in the museum as an entangled field, where the one is depending on the other; experience and enlightenment are intertwined concepts when it comes to museum communication. This might not come as a surprise for committed people in museum everyday life, but in prevalent ways of addressing museums, both within and outside the museum domain, the antagonism still exists and produces very real effects and tensions

For example, as part of the *Bildung* project of modern European societies, enlightenment was embedded in the conceptualization of content, form and objectives of museum communication; and museums are still conceived as institutions of enlightenment for their visitors and the public at large. However, alongside this understanding, attention to experience has been present all the time, from early transnational antiquarians’ and private collectors’ museum and acquisition practices on to current mediation practices and spectacular museum buildings, and with attention being variously paid to the collector, the owner, the communicator, the visitor, and even the architect.

Admittedly, this claim of an entangled

6 field – or the opposite – is stated almost without consequences as the two concepts, experience and enlightenment, can be defined and explained in an abundance of ways which might make them both interrelated and separated. On the one hand, this confusion makes the concepts awkward to use in an academic context. On the other hand, the tense field between enlightenment and experience might make them productive notions when museum communication is looked at through this lens from various analytic perspectives.

II

A specific example of the antagonistic discourse in the history of Danish museum communication, often referred to, is Sophus Müller's harsh critique of experience-oriented museum communication in his article, "Museum og Interiør" ["Museum and Interior"]; the article was published in the literary and arts journal, *Tilskueren* [*The Spectator*] in 1897 (see, for example, Rasmussen 1979:84f, Stoklund 2003:41, Ravn 2008). As a counter-image to the following articles, where experience and enlightenment are merged in a positive manner, let us briefly dwell on Müller's article in order to see how a particular logic of enlightenment once attacked experience-oriented museum communication.

In his introductory remarks, Müller, then co-director at the National Museum in Copenhagen, launches a definition of the concept "Museum" on the basis of the "archeological-historical-ethnological museum" ["arkæologisk-historisk-etnografiske Museum"]. He advocates for a scientific-orderly approach to objects as his museum should be:

A collection of archeological, historical and ethnographic objects, which is able to promote

scientific knowledge and enlightenment [Almenoplysning]. The objects are acquired in order to be preserved and to be part of a comprehensive whole in which each section is equally established. The objects are scientifically ordered and processed. They are on display in order to be seen, studied and appreciated (Müller 1897:684, all translations by the authors.)

From a bird's perspective, this definition might today be considered old-fashioned, but not entirely unrecognizable. At closer inspection, however, obsolete hierarchies between enlightenment and experience, between human and nature, between authenticity and imitation, and between significance and insignificance, become visible. For example, human-made and human-treated objects draw, according to Müller, a distinct borderline between his museum and items that belong to natural history. Nevertheless, he deliberately excludes art collections ["Kunstsamlinger"], at least since the age of Greco-Roman sculptures, as well as so-called "interior, open-air and park museums" ["Interiør-, Friluft- og Parkmuseer"] from this definition. In fact, while Müller unfolds his definition, it becomes clear why, in particular, these so-called museums are not museums at all because of their experience-oriented communicative means.

To a modest extent, he opposes the relocating and crowding of historical buildings and monuments into museum-like areas in or close to cities. He considers this an abuse of monuments in order to achieve museum artefacts. Monuments and buildings, often restored and rebuilt, belong to their original places and spaces (Müller 1897:686); removed from these surroundings, they become imitations, according to Müller, presumably implicitly referring to the first Danish open-

air museum, which opened in a park in central Copenhagen in 1897, but was very fast removed to the outskirts of the city.

More ferociously, Müller attacks the so-called “interior”-principle, which he pigeon-holes as “Interiør-Exteriør” [Interior-Exterior] (Müller 1897:689). His criticism is, among other things, directed towards their use of covert copies, their need for insignificant objects in exhibitions, the lack of comparability between items within the same category, the narrowness of specialized collections, and the risk of destroying significant museum objects. Thus, the primary aim of “Interiør-Exteriør” is not to display original artefacts, for example, authentic interiors, but to create illusive spaces – comparable to panoramas and panopticons – in which copies and the like complete missing parts in order to deceive (Müller 1897:697). The copy in itself is not the problem as it might supplement a collection or display, if originals are missing and the copies are clearly visible as copies. In the “Interiør-Exteriør”, however, the distinction between original and copy becomes blurred because the copies seamlessly appear to be original parts. Within other domains, Müller notes, this appearance will be considered a counterfeit [“en Forfalskning”] (Müller 1897:689).

Furthermore, in order to persuasively refabricate interior spaces, the museum will be enforced to acquire and preserve an abundance of items without significance for education and enlightenment. From Müller’s point of view, such irrelevant items do not belong to a proper museum:

The insignificant should not be preserved, and *Snurrepiberier* do not belong here”. (Müller 1897: 689).

“Snurrepiberier” is an old Danish term for

objects without value at all or, more modest, value for just a very limited number of people. It should be noted that Müller is not blind to the importance of museum communication. On the one hand, he approves decoration and art as a frame and background for authentic museum objects as long as the objects are not subjugated to the former (Müller 1897:698). On the other hand, objects might be acquired due to their scholarly interest as well as their communicative potential (Müller 1897:690). Müller’s scientific-orderly exhibition principle, however, disqualifies the “Interiør-Exteriør” in which scientific order is subjugated to the impression of illusive entirety. Obviously, his notion of preservation and protection also calls the interior principle into question. The museum objects should be carefully preserved and protected by way of display cases, whereas the interior display requires unprotected objects as well as no traces of too old age, as this will reveal the illusion of “authenticity”.

As a red thread in Müller’s arguments, the intended realism of the interior-exterior, which lures visitors to experience “the real thing”, is a problem. No proper scientific knowledge can establish the correct position of a random item, although the interior-exterior requires such a position of all its displayed items in order to produce convincingly “talking pictures” [“talende Billeder”] (Müller 1897:696). Moreover, mannequins cannot supplant living people. Even though guards might be dressed in peasants’ dresses, which might now seem familiar to many, Müller admits, this principle becomes absurd, if period clothing is implemented in exhibitions, for example, displaying older ages (Müller 1897:696). The aim of these realistic pictures fails, according to Müller, as the illusive experience becomes a superficial, easily passing effect.

III

Probably, the clear-cut dichotomy between enlightenment and experience reflected above seems more distinct when written in letters than lived in museum practice. Before and after Müller, even during the management of Müller at the Danish National Museum, which lasted almost 30 years (1892–1921), the entangled field of enlightenment *and* experience has almost certainly been the rule rather than the exception. Among other things, Müller did, in fact, approve decoration and the first open-air museum (mentioned above) became part of the National Museum in 1920.

Obviously, Müller's scientifically ordered archeological-historical-ethnological museum seems far away when the entangled field between experience and enlightenment is put into light today, especially when we as in this special theme include "planetariums" disseminating knowledge about astrophysics, examples of "living history", including people dressed in Stone Age's clothing, textual communication in art museums, and museums as building blocks of experience-scapes. In the following articles, furthermore, implicit definitions of these key terms clearly differ; both synchronic and diachronic displacements are at stake, but their relationships are productive in various analytic perspectives. However, we hope that the diversity of cases discussed here are illustrative for the complex configurations between elements of enlightenment and experience at stake within the entangled field of museum communication.

While Müller did not include natural history to be part of his museum and line of argument, planetariums and science centers are, however, committed to communicating scientific knowledge about astronomy and space by way of natural science and, occasionally, authentic items. At the same time, planetariums have a

legacy of offering spectacular and immersive experiences in their dome programs and have probably been doing this since the first projection planetarium worldwide was installed at the Deutsches Museum in the mid-1920s (Internet source 1). Nevertheless, many international studies indicate that this entangled field between experience and enlightenment is considered to be mutually exclusive by many staff members. In Marianne Achiam, Line Nicolaisen and Tine Ibsen's "Planetariums between Experience and Enlightenment", the authors show that the two concepts can work together. By surveying staff members from various Scandinavian planetariums on their perspectives of planetarium dome programs, they reflect upon how enlightenment and experience might be considered complementary in successful planetarium dome dissemination.

In "Questing authenticity. Rethinking enlightenment and experience in Living History", by Tilde Strandbygaard Jessen and Anette Warring, it becomes evident that Müller's museum of enlightenment has always been challenged by museum communication which, in fact, overlaps with the means of modern planetariums. Thus, emotional and multisensory ways of engaging with astronomy and space have in a similar way for long time been integrated in museums' engagement with living history. Whereas Müller's notion of authenticity was embedded in the original artefact, the authors look at the concept of authenticity and how authenticity has been construed and negotiated in three settings of living history in Denmark at three different moments in time. Among other things, the study of authenticity between experience and enlightenment offers an opportunity to explore not only how living history museums relate to society, but also how they are perceived by the general public.

In the successive articles, the analytic perspectives on experience and enlightenment moves from a micro analysis of wall text in museums towards a macro analysis of spectacular museum architecture and spaces; both approaches challenge, contextualize and destabilize the importance of Müller's museum object. In terms of enlightenment it is noteworthy, according to Palmyre Pierroux and Anne Qvale in "Wall texts in collection exhibitions. Bastions of enlightenment and interfaces for experience", that the more or less traditional wall text is better controlled by the curator than text mediated by way of digital technologies. Roughly speaking, wall texts reflect enlightenment in contrast with the individual experience of the work of art in question, but none are, however, mutually exclusive. At large, the study shows small but significant changes in a national art museum's organization, a new blended approach to digital interpretive media, and expanded types of wall texts, illustrating the premise that discursive and practical tensions between enlightenment and experience are at the core of new practices emerging in museums.

In the other case, Dorte Skot-Hansen's "The Museum as destination. The role of iconic museums in urban boosterism", the architecture and space of recent museums, among others, J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles and French museum initiatives, for example the more recent corporate branding exercise of Fondation Louis Vuitton, seem to offer predominantly experience-oriented events which bring the displayed objects to the periphery. Nevertheless, these spectacular institutions do not skip the enlightening activities of the traditional museum. The article concludes that even if the enlightenment theme has been toned down, there is still a more traditional "museum mission" behind

the iconic façades. Although the definitions of experience and enlightenment in both cases are slippery, museums are not just subjugated to the experience economy.

IV

The point of departure for this special theme has been that the concepts of enlightenment and experience continuously operate as discursive and practical tensions for museums. In hindsight, it is easy, perhaps too easy, to conclude that Sophus Müller's "archeological-historical-ethnographical museum" was defined in too narrow a manner. Everyday museum practices have always been interweaving experience and enlightenment, although, during the way, the one or the other has been given discursive predominance. Müller's article is, nevertheless, valuable as a reminder of the long-time antagonistic discourse about museums' communicative practices. While we contend that museum communication and practice should be seen as influenced by particular tensions and configurations of enlightenment and experience in an entangled field, we also want to add that the workings of the dichotomy are, indeed, very real. Hence, this special issue argues that 1) tensions between experience and enlightenment influence and stimulate museum communication practices; 2) historical communication practices may illuminate contemporary museums' handling dilemmas between enlightenment and experience; and 3) contemporary practices may illuminate past treatments of these dilemmas.

We hope that the cases discussed here will give illustrative evidence for this as well as inform further debates and analysis of practices of museum communication between enlightenment and experience.

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